

# The Air Guard's First COMBAT SAVE

By TSgt Andrew Hughan  
129th Rescue Wing



The California Air  
National Guard's 129th  
Rescue Wing performs  
an historic rescue  
mission in Iraq.

**B**ashur, Iraq – It really was a dark and stormy night when an HH-60G Pavehawk crew from the California Air National Guard's 129th

Rescue Wing made history by flying the first combat rescue by an Air National Guard unit. The 129th aircrew saved the life of a critically injured soldier in the field by flying him to an Army Field Surgical Team for emergency evaluation.

The 129th Rescue Wing is one of only three ANG Rescue Units in existence. When Operation IRAQI FREEDOM started, HH-60 helicopter crews from the 129th were positioned inside Northern Iraq to stand the alert in the event allied aircrews were shot down or needed evacuation. On April 15th, that expertise and experience were called into play.

An Army private performing field training with his unit fell and was thought to have ruptured his spleen, and received other possible internal injuries. The on-site medical teams determined the soldier needed immediate care and the call went out for Air Force Rescue.

At the alert facility, Major Taft Aujero and his crew from the 129th Rescue Wing were playing cards and relaxing, until the detachment commander, Major Steve Spillane, came in and told Major Aujero to prepare to launch on a mission. "I was

grateful to have the opportunity to fly the mission, and do it safely," said Aujero.

In addition to Major Aujero as pilot and aircraft commander; copilot Captain Curt

Green; Flight Engineer, TSgt Christopher Lasater; Gunner, TSgt Lee Sharpe; Flight Surgeon, Major (Dr.) Tom Gross; and Pararescuemen, TSgt Eric Burke, TSgt Kevin Jackson, and SSgt T.J. Conklin were ready and prepared to go. They loaded the Pavehawk with a full combat load and at 11:30 p.m. took off into the night. It was only 20 minutes from notification to takeoff.

The flight to the injured soldier was made more challenging by a series of factors: the weather was marginal. The temperature was 50 degrees, it was raining, and thunderstorms were in the local area. The aircrew was forced to fly at or below 500 feet to find holes in the clouds to guide the 20,000

pound helicopter through, while flying low-level, and looking out for ground fire around them. This was a tactical mission all the way.

"We were flying in contested territory, but the crew evaluated the risks and relied on our training to go in and get the guy. It was the right thing to do," said Aujero.

The crew landed near the injured soldier, Dr. Gross evaluated him during the one-hour transport then passed the patient and the critical medical information to the Army Field Surgical Team, where the soldier received immediate attention. A mission is not over until the crew returns safely, and

that posed another challenge.

The weather had deteriorated even more on the return flight to Bashur. Pilots Aujero and Green had to switch control of the aircraft back-and-forth to keep the high ground on the pilots side of the aircraft—then the windshield wiper motor burned out.

"We were using all of our capabilities we train with to keep us safe: flying on night vision goggles, checking the maps, watching for ground fire, and scanning for hazards," said Aujero.

With five miles to go, the valley they needed to get into was socked in with fog and rain. The crew tried several

times to get through with no success. They then circled and climbed over a 7,000 foot peak which enabled Flight Engineer Lasater to see the lights of the landing zone and guide the pilots to them.

After what many would call an adventurous flight, the crew returned safely to the landing zone, and into Air National Guard history—completing the first combat save in the history of the Air National Guard.

This was the first save for copilot Kurt Green who said, "The crew came together and did their jobs extremely well. Every member of the mission was essential and made it a complete success."

The mission, motto, and commitment of Combat Search and Rescue teams describes the daily life of the men and women of the California Air National Guard's 129th Rescue Wing: These things we do, that others may live. 🐾

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